DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 080 EA 015 764

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TITLE Educational Leadership and the Political Fact.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Conference of the Alberta School Superintendents and the Alberta Education Management Society (Edmonton, Alberta, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board Administrator Relationship; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Groups; Interests; *Leadership; *Policy Formation; *Politics of Education; Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS British Columbia (Vancouver); *Canada

ABSTRACT

One of the most significant changes influencing school board policy-making over the last dozen years has been the advent of politics. The advent of politics in educational organizations is best demonstrated by the emergence in the 1970s of interest groups. Schools and school boards have become highly targeted by such groups in part because of their high visibility and declining enrollment. In Canada, the 1970s were a decade of growing power in particular among teachers' associations. As a result of the growth of interest groups, school boards have become highly politicized, and often party-affiliated. As previously routine matters have become increasingly controversial, superintendents have discovered that good decisions are based on an accurate perception of the power and goals of interests groups. With the politicization of school boards, and the increasingly nebulous line between policy and administration, the superintendent's role now tends to be that of a negotiator designing proposals for maximum acceptability. The administrator can still be the most influential organizational member, however, if he or she maintains credibility, keeps abreast of programs and total organization, and actively supports board decisions despite personal reservations. (JBM)

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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE POLITICAL FACT

A paper presented at
The Annual Joint Conference of
Alberta School Superintendents and
Alberta Education Management Society
Edmonton, Alberta, 1983

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The basic thesis of this paper is taken from a presentation by John H. M. Andrews, "Looking Back and Ahead in School Administration." I have borrowed heavily from his presentation, which in my opinion represents a most accurate analysis of the one change in educational organization which has had the most significant impact on educational leadership: the Emergence of Politics.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE POLITICAL FACT

This paper deals with leadership; more specifically, with the changing nature of the leadership expected of senior administrators, especially those in large city school districts.

As a graduate student, I was taught that leadership was essentially an intra-organizational phenomenon. If I was to be an effective leader, I was told, I must consider such variables as the appropriate organizational model, the nature of the incumbents, the superior-subordinate relationships. Leaders were decisive, firm, consistent, understanding, and charismatic. It was also very gratifying to be assured that the leader plays a central role in the achievement of organizational goals. The most popular leadership theory was Halpin's "Consideration and Initiating Structure." Others were House's "Path-Goal" theory, and Fiedler's "Contingency Model."

I am of the opinion that although these leadership theories have been and still are very helpful to the educational administrator, they ignore one of the most significant changes which has influenced school board policy-making during the past dozen years: the advent of politics. As a result, the intra-organizational dimensions of leadership must be supplemented by those variables external to the organization which are now having an increasing impact on the decision-making process of the large urban school districts.

The advent of politics in educational organizations is a reality. Bartunek (1) reports that when deputy ministers, superintendents of schools, chairmen of school boards, deans of education,

and other administrators in education, were asked what they considered to be the most important lesson to be learned from the experience of the 70's, most replied that there was a need for a greater awareness of politics. Isherwood (2) conducted a nationwide survey of 31 chief executive officers to determine how they worked effectively in the current political environment. The vast majority (82%) agreed that they are working in an environment that is becoming more political by the year.

My observations lead me to believe that many school systems, as well as educational leaders, are simply not equipped either philosophically or through training to cope with the increasing influence of politics in the shaping of school board policy.

The Emergence of the Interest Group

The advent of politics in educational organizations is best demonstrated by the emergence of the interest groups, which grew in strength during the 70's. Educational leaders have witnessed an increased sophistication among the groups, and with the tactics they use in order to influence educational organizations. They have become forces to be reckoned with. This form of activism and its origin are explained by Andrews as follows:

> "Out of the War and Race struggles of the United States was born a realization of the potential of activism. Although it has waned in its extremism regarding social issues it has shifted in more moderate form to demands for reform of the hierarchical structure of organizations. This has been especially true of educational organizations." (3)

Schools and school boards seem to have been especially targeted by the interest groups. There are undoubtedly many theories as to why this is so. Boyd (4) says that in the fragmented scheme

of local government, public schools stand out as peculiarly conspicuous and accessible at least physically. With regard to educational matters, the citizens have a reasonably clear idea of where to turn. The same is not true when it concerns other services. Boyd says these services are balkanized into remote and hidden sanitation boards, pollution control boards, public transportation agencies, and the like, and frequently leave citizens baffled about where and how to seek redress of grievances.

In my opinion, the declining enrolment of the 70's would have to be another reason. Declining enrolment and political activism are related in that, through the 70's, we have seen an increasingly larger segment of the community who no longer have any children in our schools and who are therefore no longer getting the "direct benefits" of education. In Vancouver, where this group represents more than 70% of the community, we have heard repeated concerns over the increasing costs of public school education while enrolments are declining.

Finally, we would have to consider the growing power of teachers' associations through the 70's. This is especially the case in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia. In Quebec and British Columbia, teachers helped topple governments. To manifest solidarity, militant Ontario teachers staged some of the largest demonstrations in the province's history.

At the local level, teachers have organized their own interest groups and have throughout the 70's increasing shaped school board policy.

The Partisan School Board

One of the major effects of the growth of interest groups has been the emergence of the highly politicized school board. Bartunek (5) found that research in the politics of Canadian education indicates that school board elections, at least in some of the larger districts, are not, as many would believe, non-partisan. School board candidates use political party machinery. Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver are singled out as cities where the involvement of civic political parties or citizen action movements make for a partisan struggle between competing ideologies and groups. In British Columbia, Bartunek found that of the 75 school districts, eight (which are in the greater metropolitan Vancouver area) have partisan boards.

The emergence of the political party at the school board level has significantly altered the decison-making process of the school board and its relationship to the educational leader. Most leaders were trained to work with trustees who were elected frequently by acclamation, on their personal commitment to make those decisions while in office that would best represent their constituents. While some issues were given considerable prominence during a campaign (for example, the need for a new school or additional facilities to better serve the community, or better transportation for children), most issues, especially those dealing with professional matters, never reached the level of public debate. Moreover, there was general acceptance that policy was the responsibility of the elected board, while administration was best left to the professional staff. Once elected, board members tended to be amenable to influence by other board members and particularly by the professional staff.

The process is rapidly changing. Now, the educational leader must work with school board members whose election is significantly different. Many elected boards, especially in large city districts, are divided along clearly established party lines. Trustees of a particular party are elected on what is frequently a clearly articulated party platform, subject to much less influence or compromise. In Vancouver, for instance, only two of the 45 board members elected during the past ten years were elected without affiliation to one of the three civic parties. Of course, the situation will vary from one district to another. Even where only some board members are affiliated with a party, the trend to increasing politicization is clear.

In this shift to highly politicized public education, the expectations of the Superintendent as the chief executive officer have changed substantially. Whereas in the past the formulation of board policy was subject to considerable influence by the Superintendent, this is no longer necessarily the case. The Superintendent working in these districts will learn all too quickly the realities of the world of politics where, unlike any other reasonable world, expertise and knowledge must get behind clout. Many a Superintendent may find that for the first time he or she is allied with or pitted against a strong lobby group, or a significant number of board members, or a representative of a highly organized and increasingly militant teacher organization.

Although the Superintendent will continue to wield considerable power, the degree of his/her influence will vary according to the issue. Routine matters which are not controversial are still largely influenced by the Superintendent. Controversial matters,

which are frequently included in the party platform, or matters which have been brought to the board by an interest group between elections, are subject to much less influence. As school boards become more politicized, an increasing number of issues are raised to the level of public debate. Examples of matters which may still be considered routine in most districts are those technical concerns related to the implementation of school programs, hiring procedures, and building operations. On the other hand, family life education, child abuse, minimum competency testing, native Indian survival programs, public involvement in "professional" matters such as the selection of principals, are only some of an increasing number of issues that become controversial.

The degree of influence an interest group will have on the decision-making process of the board will vary considerably. Boards controlled by a party with a clearly articulated specific set of goals will be subject to less influence from those interest groups whose objectives vary from those of the board majority. Boards elected on more general commitments are subject to more pressure and influence. When such is the case, whether or not the board accedes to the demands of an interest group depends not on their feelings about an issue, probably less on the opinions of the professional staff, but to an increasing degree on the power of the particular group in question.

Power of the group is related to the amount of pressure it can exert, which in turn is determined by the sanctions it has at its command. Stated differently, the so-called "bottom line" is frequently determined by how much practical damage the particular group can inflict on the board, or conversely how much practical

reward the group can bestow upon the board if its wishes are followed. Under this system, therefore, a good decision is one that is based on an accurate perception of the interest groups, their objectives, and sanctions or rewards at their command.

Andrews reminds us that a decision made in this context is not necessarily in accord with the idealistic concept of the "public interest," because frequently a small but powerful group will prevail, by the rules of the game, over an unaroused general public. The decision is even less apt to be in accord with its technical or rational soundness. (6)

The Nebulous Line Between Policy and Administration

As a result of this politicization, it is not surprising to see more active involvement of board members in administrative matters, traditionally regarded as the domain of the professional. Whereas it was previously expected that the educational leader would consult various groups and individuals who were to be affected by a proposed decision prior to making a recommendation to the board, trustees are now adopting a personal and direct approach, frequently by-passing the educational leader. The job of trustees is shifting from a part-time to full-time involvement.

This approach is well described by Green, former Director of Education with the Toronto School Board:

> "If we have a major issue, the board will set up a work group, composed of five or six trustees with administrative assistance, and they canvass the system, hold hearings, meet with groups of parents, groups of professionals, groups of students, groups of teachers, other trustees of other jurisdictions, and receive submissions. (We are, for example, in the middle of a second draft of a multi-cultural work group report. The background material for it is a pile of briefs two feet high. It sits on a

> stool in my office, and every day it grows.) Such a style of operation is very cumbersome, but it's also very open and very responsive." (7)

Educational Leadership Within the Politicized School Board

After a recent study of organizational leadership and the Superintendent, Pitner and Ogawa concluded that the traditional notions of leadership are much too narrow and have greatly inhibited the description of important dimensions of leadership as manifested in the Superintendent.

They found that Superintendents spent much of their time studying societal structures and preferences, monitoring their environments, and reading public opinion. "Superintending is communicating." (8)

In his review of a century and a half of change in the superintendency, Cuban discusses three ideal types of superintendent leadership, which have been successful at varying times through the years: the teacher/scholar, the chief administrator, and the negotiator/statesman. Cuban goes on to state that when pressure from well organized groups strikes the schools, and when public opinion of schools becomes sharply sceptical, in such times the dominant leadership pattern with the strongest survival power is the negotiator/statesman.

> "When conflict escalates, especially when it comes from outside the organization, superintendent efforts to minimize and eliminate it may seriously misjudge and underestimate the sources and direction of that conflict. The negotiator/statesman conception at least embraces the notion that either external or organizational conflict is inevitable, even basic to human affairs. Different interest groups are legitimate and somehow must be dealt with." (9)

Cuban sees an increasing number of urban superintendents approach the role of negotiator/statesman.

Andrews suggests that under highly politicized conditions, the educational leader, to be effective, must assume the role of "mediator." The Superintendent must be skilled in identifying and analysing the positions taken by the board and the interest groups. He or she will have to design finely balanced proposals that will maximize acceptability.

> "Though in the past the mediator style has not had much acclaim in education, it must be clear that it is now in great demand. No school system can survive in healthy condition without having its leadership highly skilled in these practices." (10)

Out of all these theses comes a disturbing question: Where is the educational leadership of old? Is leadership reduced to developing the skills in the administrator that will make it possible to maximize acceptability? What educationally sound decisions will evolve from that style of leadership? Surely there must be a place in the decison-making process for influence through the professional skills of the administrator. Andrews offers the following solution:

> "In the present political context of schools, educational leadership can be achieved not by ignoring the need for successful mediation, but by building on top of it. In this higher style the school Superintendent uses his professional background and good judgment to take a positive position on the issue in question. He enters into the fray of opposing views as a pressure group in his own right." (11)

Naturally, there are hazards to this approach. Seasoned administrators will be quick to remind you that you can't afford to lose too often. I am of the opinion that the administrator, even under the more politicized school boards, can still be the most influential person in the organization. In order to maintain this

position, he or she will have to be credible. This means that the Superintendent must be perceived as knowledgeable in administration, and as up to date as possible in the technical knowledge related to the school district. Above all, the Superintendent must be ethical in his/her relationship to the board, the members of the organization, and the interest groups.

The Superintendent's knowledge of administration, through training, and experience in the district, will help him/her to become increasingly effective through influence rather than power. He/she will know the importance of keeping open lines of communication with board, staff and community groups. When the Superintendent enters the fray, he/she should be armed with the most up to date information on current programs, and related research. His/her knowledge of the total organization should be unequalled. The most up to date information should be available through the Superintendent or through his/her staff. In spite of these efforts, however, he/she will not always be successful. Under those circumstances, the Superintendent will have to accept the decision gracefully, and not only support it, but be seen to support it without question, remembering that there will be other days and other issues.

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